

## Colossians 4:7-18

We come to the end of Paul's letter to the Colossians here, and Paul ends his letter just as he started it—with a greeting. This closing greeting is much more personal, however, as Paul mentions a series of 10 individuals by name, the majority of which are members of Paul's inner circle. Most scholars agree that Paul writes this letter from house arrest in Rome (cf. Acts 28), so these men are likely with Paul in Rome and Paul is commending them to the church in Colossae and sending their greetings.

In this way, we get a taste of the relational interaction of the early church. The early church is a tightknit group, within which Paul's inner circle is an even tighter group.

A common tendency is to see a list of names and skim through this section, as if the good stuff of Colossians is already past. This, too, however, is the inspired Word of God, however, and it is profitable to us. In particular, this closing section of Colossians challenges us in our own relationships and displays the amazing life transformation that Christ's work brings about.

**As to all my affairs, Tychicus, our beloved brother and faithful servant and fellow bond-servant in the Lord, will bring you information. For I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts; and with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of your number. They will inform you about the whole situation here.**

Tychicus and Onesimus are the couriers of Paul's letters. Colossae was only one stop on these men's journey as they visited some of the churches that Paul had a role in planting. Biblical evidence suggests that on this trip, these two men carried with them at least four letters—Colossians, Ephesians, Philemon, and a letter to the church at Laodicea that we have since lost.

Notice the words used of these men—"beloved...faithful...fellow...bond-servant." These are words that are common in this passage and that define us as believers. Note in particular "bond-servant," a word which calls to mind a lifetime of servitude, a servitude that was sometimes voluntary. This is the picture of our relationship to Christ—beloved child but also willing bond-servant. Jesus is our friend, yes, but also our Lord and King to whom we owe complete allegiance and obedience.

Tychicus is mentioned in Acts 20, as well as in Ephesians, 2 Timothy and Titus. Clearly, he is a trusted companion of Paul who will adequately declare Paul's circumstances in a way that gives courage to young churches, which are themselves in the midst of a variety of struggles. Thomas Constable notes that Paul describes Tychicus as a man in right relationship with God—"faithful servant"—and with other believers—"beloved brother." Imagine having the praise of the Apostle Paul, a man with very high standards when it comes to faithfulness to the Lord.

Meanwhile, Onesimus has an even more prominent place in Scripture, as his life is the impetus behind the New Testament book of Philemon. Onesimus was a slave in the household of Philemon in Colossae. He left his master and made his way to Rome where it appears Paul led him to Christ, and over time, Onesimus became a faithful and trusted man of God. Now, Paul sends him back to Colossae and to his master. In Philemon, Paul says that Onesimus was formerly useless but has become immeasurably useful and he describes how difficult it was to send Onesimus, who he describes as "his very heart."

Reflect for a moment on the astounding truth we see played out in Onesimus. Here was a man who was a slave but had escaped to freedom. The message of the Gospel, however, compels him to return and submit to his slaveowner. Meanwhile, Paul exhorts the slave owner Philemon to treat Onesimus as a fellow heir of eternal life. In this way, the Gospel has called both of them to lay down their rights. Earlier in chapter 4, Paul speaks to masters and slaves of how the Gospel changes their interaction. In Onesimus and Philemon, we see that he's not just discussing an idea. The Gospel really does change everything.

**Aristarchus, my fellow prisoner, sends you his greetings; and also Barnabas's cousin Mark (about whom you received instructions; if he comes to you, welcome him); and also Jesus who is called Justus; these are the only fellow workers for the kingdom of God who are from the circumcision, and they have proved to be an encouragement to me.**

These three men stand out to us and to Paul because they are Jews. Here again, we see the power of the Gospel to transform lives. Not only have these three men trusted in Jesus as the Messiah, but they have torn down the barrier between Jew and Gentile (cf. Ephesians 2:10-16). These three Jews are sending their greetings to a Gentile church while they live among Gentile believers in Rome. This fact is truly astounding.

Mark in particular stands out because his story is prominent within the book of Acts. In Acts 12, he joins up with Paul and Barnabas on their missionary journey but in the midst of that journey, he deserted the pair. In Acts 15, Barnabas suggests that they give Mark another chance and take him on the next journey, but Paul is unwilling to put his trust in Mark, and the disagreement is so strong that Paul and Barnabas split ways.

A few years later, however, as Paul writes this letter to the Colossians, reconciliation has clearly happened. We don't know what the process looked like, but clearly, Mark is again part of Paul's inner circle. (We should be thankful for this, too, because it is Mark that provides us with the Gospel of Mark). In this simple verse, therefore, we are reminded that the Gospel always holds out hope for healing in relationships.

**Epaphras, who is one of your number, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, sends you his greetings, always laboring earnestly for you in his prayers, that you may stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of God. For I testify for him that he has a deep concern for you and for those who are in Laodicea and Hierapolis.**

When we think of Paul discipling others, we usually think of Timothy. Epaphras is less known than Timothy, but he is an equally inspiring picture of discipleship in action. Epaphras is a native of Colossae who Paul led to Christ and disciplined before Epaphras returned to Colossae and planted a church in his hometown (and perhaps churches in other cities as well). This letter to the Colossians is prompted by Epaphras's coming to Paul and informing him about the strengths and weaknesses of this young church.

Paul has never been to Colossae but clearly trusts Epaphras's leadership. He has incredible respect for Epaphras and wants to commend his leadership to the Colossians (cf. 1:7-8). Epaphras has a "deep concern" for the Colossians, language that echoes Paul's own "great struggle." (2:1) In other words, Epaphras feels the same way towards the Colossians and works the same way as Paul. Paul has disciplined Epaphras in ways that have shaped Epaphras's character and his actions.

Finally, notice what Paul says about the kind of things Epaphras prays for his fellow believers—"that [they] would stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of God." Oh, that we might all be praying this sort of thing for believers we love! These are the things they truly need!

**Luke, the beloved physician, sends you his greetings, and also Demas. Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea and also Nympha and the church that is in her house. When this letter is read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and you, for your part read my letter that is coming from Laodicea. Say to Archippus, "Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it."**

We conclude the list of individuals with four Gentiles. Luke is Paul's physician and the author of the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts. Next comes Demas, but unlike Luke, who is faithful to Paul and to their ministry to the end, Demas will later abandon Paul and Paul will inform Timothy that Demas "loved this present world." (2 Timothy 4:10) In this way, Demas serves as a reminder that association with mature believers does not guarantee spiritual growth or faithful service to the Lord. The world remains tempting and our hearts are deceitful; we must continue to press into the Lord ourselves.

Nympha hosts a house church and is the only woman that Paul greets here, and Archippus is likely the son of Philemon (cf. Philemon 1:2) who Paul challenges to fulfill the role that God has equipped him and called him to.

This group of four individuals combines with the previous six to form a powerful testimony in two particular ways. First, the Gospel transforms lives. The message that Paul has shared throughout the book of Colossians has had dramatic results in these 10 individuals—nine men and one woman who have laid down their lives for the Gospel at great personal cost. Not only that, but this message brought Jews and Gentiles together, slaves and masters, men and women, all for the sake of this message of God's reconciliation with man.

Second, Paul is no lone ranger. He draws tremendous encouragement from serving alongside likeminded men and women. Matt Chandler notes that Paul does not say, "You remember Onesimus, who is so funny." Every one of these 10 is identified by their radical commitment to the Gospel. Paul needed these co-laborers, both to widen his impact and for his personal encouragement (yes, even Paul needed encouragement). The Christian life is not a solitary one and we must surround ourselves with radical followers of Christ.

### **I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my imprisonment. Grace be with you.**

In this way, Paul concludes this letter with a signature, an admonition to remember him and a blessing of grace. Paul ends five of his letters with this phrase "Grace be with you." Similarly, in Philippians, he refers to the Philippians as "partakers of grace with me" (1:7)

To that end, as we conclude our study of Colossians, may we be reminded that like Paul and like these early Christians, we have drastic need of grace, and our loving Father has met and continues to meet that need in Christ. Grace be with us.

### Sample Study Outline

- I. Pray
- II. Context—Who is Paul? Who are the Colossians? What have they been talking about?
- III. Read Passage
- IV. Exploratory Questions
  - a. What do we see of God in this passage?
  - b. What do we see of man in this passage?
  - c. What's the most important word in the passage?
  - d. When you read a list of names like this, do you wonder why it's in the Bible? Do you think it has value?
  - e. Which of these people would you like to have lunch with? Why? (Go research them a bit if you want).
  - f. What do you think it would have been like to be part of Paul's inner circle? Or part of one of these early churches?
  - g. Why does Paul challenge them to know and remember his imprisonment? Is that selfish to get them to focus on him?
- V. Application Questions
  - a. How has your life been transformed by Jesus and the Gospel? How are you different now from a year ago?
  - b. Who are your closest friends? Who are you co-laboring for the Gospel with? Is there anyone? Is the Gospel really thing that defines any of your relationships?
  - c. Are there any relationships that you'll holding onto for your comfort when you or they need to be doing something else?
  - d. Is there a ministry that you personally need to step up and fulfill?
  - e. Who are you laboring for earnestly?
  - f. Is there anyone you need to send a Christ-honoring greeting or message to?
  - g. How does God call you to action through this passage this week?
- VI. Other questions/thoughts
- VII. So what we've seen here is:

- a. The Christian life is one of faithful service to God, co-laboring with others
- b. The Gospel transforms individual lives and social relationships

VIII. Pray